R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 011 738 FL 000 254

AFTERTHOUGHTS ON A PROFESSION.

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PUB DATE APR 66

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.09 HC-$0.36 9P.

DESCRIPTORS- *LANGUAGES, *LANGUAGE TEACHERS, *PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS, *TEACHING, LEXINGTON

THE AUTHOR DISCUSSES THE ORGANIZATION OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFESSION. THE PROBLEMS, CONFUSION, WASTEFUL COMPETITION, AND UNCOORDINATED ACTIVITY RESULTING FROM THE PROLIFERATION OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE FIELD ARE DESCRIBED. THE SOLUTION SUGGESTED TO REMEDY THIS SITUATION IS THE CREATION OF A NEW, NATIONAL MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATION TO PROMOTE THE INTERESTS OF ALL TEACHERS OF MODERN AND CLASSICAL LANGUAGES AT ALL LEVELS, AN ORGANIZATION THAT WOULD, AMONG OTHER THINGS, COORDINATE THE SCATTERED ACTIVITIES OF EXISTING GROUPS, ATTACK BASIC PROBLEMS, ISSUE POLICY STATEMENTS, ENCOURAGE EXPERIMENTATION, DISTRIBUTE A PEDAGOGICAL JOURNAL, AND SECURE FOUNDATION AND FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR PROJECTS. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED TO THE KENTUCKY FOREIGN LANGUAGE CONFERENCE (19TH, LEXINGTON, APRIL 20, 1966). (AM)

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AFTERTHOUGHTS ON A PROFESSION*

By William Riley Parker

Because I may later have to eat some of my words, I shall try to make them palatable. I have had to eat my words before, alas, and, believe me, they did not taste so good as the dinner we have just enjoyed. Before you stands an English teacher and convicted perjurer who, ten years ago (in 1956), resigned as Executive Secretary of the Modern Language Association and foolishly said, not just to himself but also to others, that he had given enough years of his life to worrying about the problems of foreign language teachers, that their situation was now improved, and that he would make no more speeches to groups like this one, but would devote himself instead to his own scholarship and to the problems of English teaching. That was in 1956, after I had served for four years as Director of the Foreign Language Program of the MLA. Two years later I found myself commuting every week from Bloomington, Indiana, to Washington, D. C., and explaining the Language Development Program of the NDEA to literally thousands of people, including, at one point (I recall), a large audience in Louisville. After a Wunderjahr spent spending in bureaucracy, I embraced my original resolution even more ardently, but then, two years later, I found myself chairman of a committee charged with formulating the Indiana Language Program. With this successfully funded by the Ford Foundation (the support has thus far totalled more than a million dollars), I enjoyed the first sabbatical of my life, a happy twelve months in England, where, incidentally, I learned that teachers were inventing an exciting, new, audio-lingual approach to language learning. Returning to the United States, I made a distressing discovery -- that Latin in the public schools was threatened with extinction, partly as a result of the prosperity of the modern foreign languages. Since no true humanist could be silent in the face of such an imminent disaster, I tried in 1964 to write "The Case for Latin."

You will forgive, I trust, these brief reminders of my credentials. They are another way of saying two things that can be put more bluntly: first, that I would not be here tonight if I thought of my role as giving one more after-dinner speech to one more captive audience of foreign-language teachers; and second, that instead of entertaining you for half an hour, I have something very serious to discuss with you which perhaps my past labors on your behalf will persuade you to take seriously, as at least unmotivated by professional prejudice or self-interest.

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*An after-dinner address delivered 29 April 1966 at the Nineteenth University of Kentucky Foreign Language Conference in Lexington.

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It is not about Latin--though before I come to my subject I feel impelled to tell you that the most recent, as yet unpublished statistics on enrollments in Latin are even more appalling than those which prompted me to restate "The Case." It is not exaggeration to say that Latin is disappearing from our schools. If modern foreign language teachers stand by and let this happen, or, worse, if they actually encourage ignorant principals and superintendents to drop Latin in favor of longer sequences for Spanish or French, I shall regret every single hour I have given to promoting the modern foreign languages in American education. I shall also pity you, for you will have sown the seeds of your own destruction: if Latin is allowed to be squeezed out of the secondary-school curriculum, the modern languages will be next, and English had better start worrying about its status. The academic humanities are a chain, constantly threatened with erosion in a climate of utilitarianism, vocationalism, and present-mindedness. It was because the modern foreign languages seemed to be the weakest link in that chain, back in 1952, that English teachers like Ken Mildenberger, Al Marckwardt, Win Stone, John Fisher, and I devoted countless days to strengthening the link. The weak link today is certainly Latin. How much time are you willing to give--before the chain breaks?

What I have just been saying is not an inappropriate preamble to my main theme in this speech, which is the organization of your profession. In the half hour or so that I shall impose upon your patience, I shall review the situation, give my honest opinion of the problems which it presents, then, hoping to be constructive, suggest a solution, and finally say another word or two about Latin.

I cannot, of course, tell you anything you do not already know about the way in which the profession of foreign language teachers is organized--if that is the right word for the chaos of conferences and associations, local, state, regional, and national, which you somehow manage to enjoy or tolerate. In 1952, when it became urgently necessary for me, an English teacher, to know your organizational picture and to understand it, I confess to you that I was appalled by what I learned. No rational man or woman among you, given a chance to start again from scratch, would create such compounded confusion, such a welter of uncoordinated activity, such wasteful competition, such ineffectual meetings as a number I once attended (including one in this pleasant place), or so many national organizations with only one thing in common--their inability to cope with the present realities of Federal and foundation support.

I tried once, in the early fifties, to capture the complete picture on paper, with all the dates of founding (and, in some instances, of death and dubious resurrection), but I eventually abandoned the attempt as taking too much time from more pressing matters. I did enough "research," however, to learn what I needed to know and what perhaps you could have told me: my problem, if I were to be of any help to language teachers, was (in the words of John Milton) to "disinherit Chaos, that reigns here." Some states had no foreign language teachers associations; others had two or three, plus chapters of the AAT's, plus the foreign language section or sections of the state education association. There were also many regional conferences or associations, large and small, effective and ineffectual. There are today four

regional MLA's which, like the national MLA, include English teachers, but the Pacific Coast counterpart of these, the PAPC, includes also teachers of the classical languages. The large Central States Modern Language Teachers Association excludes English teachers, as does, also, I believe, the New England MLA. Some of the conferences are working conferences, involving thoughtful preparation by industrious committees; others are simply talk-fests or paper-reading affairs. On the national stage there are the various AAT's, the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations, the American Philological Association, the American Classical League, the Linguistic Society of America, and, more recently, a foreign language Department in the NEA. I have far from exhausted the list, but this is perhaps enough to remind you of the situation, and I want now to analyze it, first from the perspective I had in 1952, and then from my present perspective.

As I look back, I honestly do not know of any organization other than the MLA that could have mounted a combined foreign language study and action program with strong foundation support. Do not misunderstand me: I am not boasting that no other association could have done so good a job; I am saying that your profession had provided no other association to which the Rockefeller Foundation would or could have made that initial grant of $120,000 which was later parlayed into literally millions of dollars of Federal and foundation support. For obvious reasons no single AAT or classical association could have done the job; the NEA language department did not then exist; and the National Federation lacked not only a staff but also dues-paying members. There existed, in other words, no national membership association for teachers of all foreign languages at all levels. The MLA was not such an organization either, but it came the nearest to being such, and it was the only organization in the language field with a full-time, competent staff and with physical headquarters adequate for conferences and promotional activities. If I were to add that it is still, fourteen years later, the only organization in the language field with these increasingly important assets, I would come to the end of my speech too soon; so please put such an embarrassing thought out of your minds.

Many of us felt from the outset that it was almost preposterous for the research-centered MLA to be trying to save the entire language profession at the lowest and most critical point in its history. Could we possibly cope with "FLES"? Had we any means of communicating with secondary school teachers? No one worried about such problems more than I, an English teacher who, as Executive Secretary of the MLA and editor of its learned journal, became ex officio Director of the FL Program. But there was an urgent job to be done, and what other organization could do it? This was realized by Earl McGrath, who in his famous St. Louis speech of 1952 called upon the MLA to take the initiative. It was also realized by the MLA Executive Council, half of whom were English professors, and they had authorized me, before the McGrath speech, to negotiate with the Rockefeller Foundation for support. Their major concern, I can tell you with complete confidence, was for the future of the humanities in American education. I deeply wish that there were more of such concern in evidence today, fourteen years after the inauguration of what I then named, not the Modern Foreign Language, but the Foreign Language Program.

Fourteen years are a long time, and most human memories are short. I am now happily remote from any role of leadership in the FL field, but it disturbs me, nevertheless, when I hear, as I occasionally do these days, of people who hate the MLA or are suspicious of its motives, who regard it as power-hungry and monopolistic. The favorite epithet, I am told, is "octopus." I cannot help wondering what other FL organization is now prepared to give squid pro quo. Even the classicists must turn to the MLA for the latest and most reliable information about enrollments in their own field--asking, I suppose, "What's new, octopussy?" My memory is not short, and I recall clearly, not only the many resolutions that were piously passed by other language organizations back in the 1950's, and the many formal pledges of cooperation, but also the countless hours that I and others spent in utterly fruitless efforts to figure out how the other language organizations, with no money, no headquarters, and no staff, could in any way help as organizations. We made use of their ablest members, of course; it is irrelevant that most of them were also MLA members. Without bright, well-informed people the FL Program was nothing, but who needed the other FL organizations to enroll them?

The situation actually was worse than I have just indicated. We could hardly pretend that the other FL organizations did not exist; indeed, I envied the National Federation its Modern Language Journal, issue after issue of which gave not the slightest hint that a revolution was in progress in the modern foreign language field; and for a time the FL Program augmented its Steering Committee with representatives of the various AAT's. This was a disappointing experiment, later abandoned, and if I explained why, I would lose, I fear, some good friends. Suffice it to say that, from the point of view of an English teacher, neither ward politics nor the lofty principle of representation by languages can be effective in a field that logically involves more than 3,000 spoken languages and illogically involves almost as many language organizations. I learned to beware the language teacher who is constantly running for dogcatcher, yet cannot translate cave canem. I learned to trust only the language teacher who cares deeply about all foreign languages, including Twi--and including Latin.

I have a final point to make before proposing a remedy. Prepare yourselves for a shock. From September 1958 to the present, the NDEA has made available to your profession many millions of dollars for studies, experimentation, and research. Would you like to make a quick guess as to how many of your numerous conferences and associations, local, state, regional, and national, have during the past eight years even asked for any of this Federal support? To the best of my knowledge, no national organization, with one exception, has even requested a dime. Is it not time you asked yourselves why? What use is any national organization of foreign language teachers that is not equipped to meet the many unprecedented opportunities of the present? Are you content to rely forever on the MLA, with its heavy membership in English and its heavy concern with literary scholarship and higher education, simply because it is a responsible fiscal agent and has a full-time secretariat with energy and skill? If the MLA is in any sense an "octopus," your inertia and indifference made it so.

It is already later than you think for your profession to create and wholeheartedly support a membership association to promote the interests of all language teachers at all levels, to distribute a high-quality professional and pedagogical journal with no aspirations to imitate PMLA, to collect and disseminate pertinent facts and statistics, to hold truly stimulating annual meetings, to coordinate the scattered activities of all existing FL groups, to seek out and publicize excellence in FL teaching, to encourage experimentation, to tackle boldly such basic problems as teacher-training (including the training of college teachers), to issue influential policy statements for the guidance of the public and educators in other fields, and to secure foundation and Federal support for its manifold projects. Such an organization should give its members more than their money's worth from the moment they join. It should have prestige enough to be an effective spokesman for your profession in the press or in Congressional hearings. It should have highly respected leadership with no taint of petty politics. It should have its physical headquarters in some strategic location, such as New York or Washington, and an adequate staff of trained, full-time workers, including a full-time treasurer who is trained to cope with the complexities of Government contracts. It should have a young, energetic, imaginative director or executive officer whose early scholarly accomplishments would earn him the respect of other leaders in his profession and also free him personally from the frustrations that so often, these days, inhibit purely professional activitity.

It is later than you think for you to create and enjoy such a membership association because, for one thing, it presumably now exists in the NEA Department of Foreign Languages. This, as most of you must know, is a space-age venture that has not been able to get off the ground. Its failures thus far were easily predictable, and were, indeed, predicted. For reasons good or bad, most college and university teachers do not want to join the NEA; teachers in general do not want to join anything until they know what they are going to get for their hard-earned money; and most of the services which the NEA Department vainly hoped to give were already, of course, being provided free of charge or for nominal sums by the FL Program of the MLA, which has never (I can assure you) insisted or even suggested that elementary or secondary school teachers become members in order to enjoy its many benefits. For these and other reasons--some of which would be embarrassing to discuss publicly--the NEA Department of Foreign Languages, like Kentucky bourbon in Prohibition days, was stillborn. A number of my good friends were involved in its inception and organization; I am sorry that they would not listen to me. My advice to them, in brief, was first to create a strong, on-going national organization of FL teachers, and then, when it became truly representative of the profession, to let it become also a department of the NEA. There is precedent for this strategy.

It is later than you think because, for another thing, the national AAT's are unlikely to greet a competitive organization with little glad cries, and the MLA is unlikely to surrender its continuing commitments and responsibilities to any organization in which it has little or no confidence. Nor is the MLA, with its more than 10,000 college and university professors of English, likely to become the organization I am dreaming about, inviting to

membership far more than 10,000 elementary and secondary school teachers of foreign languages, including Latin. The MLA cannot issue a similar invitation to teachers of English at all levels because, since 1911, the field of English has had the kind of national organization I am dreaming about for FL teachers--the National Council of Teachers of English, with more than 100,000 dues-paying members. If you had created a National Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages back in 1911, all would have been different. But you did not. Instead, you created the separate, divisive AAT's, and a non-membership National Federation which theoretically would coordinate the activities of all the modern foreign language associations, national, state, and regional, but in point of fact has never done so and is unlikely ever to do so. What it has done, however, is to publish a professional and pedagogical journal devoted to all the modern foreign languages, but not to the classical languages; and the existence of the MLJ, currently a very fine periodical (in case you hadn't noticed), is still another reason why it is later than you think.

But I did not come here to depress you and to interfere with normal digestive processes. It is indeed late, but what I am advocating is still possible. The harsh realities of the situation, as I see them, dictate that such a new organization, to be successful, must acquire a very large membership with unprecedented speed, must offer its members a great deal in the way of services from the very outset, must make use of the revitalized MLJ, as its journal (this I understand is technically possible), and must promote, not compete with, the existing AAT's and classical associations. That is a very large order, and I can see one and only one way in which it can be achieved. You will have to ask the octopus to give up some of its arms, without treating the octopus as a sucker! To drop this unpleasant metaphor: the thing is possible if the MLA, with its present large staff, its numerous on-going activities and services, and its fourteen years of experience and accumulated know-how, would be willing to initiate and sponsor and during its growing-period actually supervise such a new association, keeping it free from the usual political maneuvering and the usual competition between different language groups, and gradually turning over to it most, but not all, of the concerns of the present FL Program.

Is this an idle dream? I have good reasons to believe it is not. I could name a number of acknowledged leaders in your profession who also believe it possible, granted the conditions I have specified. The big objections to it, of course, are that it would be most unusual and most undemocratic--that language teachers should be free to start their own national organization in the usual way, without MLA control. They are; they did; and the results you know. It would be unrealistic to expect the MLA to dismantle or surrender a program which has wrought an educational revolution in this century without guarantees that this program would continue in strong, effective hands. You will therefore have to trust the MLA, and its present leaders from the field of English, as you trusted it in the days when you were not so prosperous and when the MLA was dreaming the dreams that culminated in the NDEA.

You must understand that I am not here as a spokesman for the MLA or any other group. I can promise you nothing. But I have more reason to trust the MLA and its present leaders than anyone now listening to me, and I am confident, personally, that it would put the welfare of your profession before any of its supposedly selfish or monopolistic concerns, however lucrative. In plainer English, I would expect the MLA, given the proper assurances and proper safeguards, to turn over most of its FL Program to a strong, national, membership association of language teachers.

If this prospect appeals to any of you, make your opinions known. What are you willing to do about it personally? Don't tell <u>me</u>, because, thank God, I would not be involved; send your opinions and constructive ideas to Ken Mildenberger or John Fisher at the MLA headquarters, 4 Washington Place, New York 3, N.Y. The general idea will not come as a surprise to anyone there, for the simple reason that it has been talked about, I can tell you, for all of fourteen years. What may surprise the people there is that you, too, care, and are willing to help.

You will have noticed that, all along, I have been assuming a national association that includes the classical languages. The <u>Modern</u> Language Association would not, I feel sure, object to this, but some Latin teachers might, fearing that they would simply be gobbled up or outnumbered, their interests even more shamefully neglected. As you know by now, I too would deplore such an outcome, which, in the present situation, would be tragic. Latin now desperately needs the support of the other foreign languages, and of English too, if it is to survive in public education. That, in my considered judgment, is one more reason for abandoning, at this critical point, the political concept of representation by languages and organizations which has plagued your profession almost from its birth. For example, the editorship of the <u>MLJ</u>, from 1916 until just recently, has been determined, not by superior ability but rather by rotation among languages. All your committees have been organized on this political principle--except the committees appointed by directors of the FL Program. May I, as an outsider, remind you that there are problems of <u>foreign language</u> teaching and that your ranks are blessed with people who are quite capable of thinking in such terms, instead of promoting their own subject? Were it not so, I could never have developed an FL Program--nor would I have wanted to. You must have faith in your own leaders, many of whom share, I know, my concern about the future of Latin in the schools. If you will do this, you can help to create the future instead of simply enduring it. I realize that what I have proposed here may be only a shot in the dark. But if enough of you agree, and if you also express your belief, you here at Lexington could make it a shot heard round the world.

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